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SUBJECT: ISLAMISTS PULL THE PLUG ON TV SHOW DESPITE

BUSINESS OUTCRY

REF: 03 MANAMA 2686

Classified By: CDA Robert Ford. Reasons: 1.4 (B) and (D).

¶11. (C) SUMMARY. In the latest in a string of recent victories, Bahraini Islamists earlier this month compelled the Middle East Broadcasting Channel 2 (MBC 2) reality television show "Big Brother" to halt its production in Bahrain. The show's production team left Bahrain despite public support for the production from Bahrain's usually timorous business community. Businessmen are complaining about the lack of GOB support for the production, and the 200 jobs that came with it; they complain that the GOB's retreat on Islamists' social policy demands are damaging Bahrain's business climate. The production's closure and other Islamist agitation could hurt Bahrain; one prominent U.S. company told us earlier this week that Bahrain's political climate appears less stable than Qatar and the UAE and hence it is less attractive as a regional base. We cannot explain the GOB's apparent acquiescence to Sunni Islamist demands when the King has the political tools to block their initiatives. Some Bahraini businessmen are beginning to fight back. END SUMMARY.

BIG BROTHER GETS GOB BLESSING

¶12. (C) On February 21, Saudi owned MBC 2 launched its Middle Eastern version of the reality show "Big Brother." Based on the original Dutch show, 12 female and male contestants were filmed 24 hours per day living in a house. By group vote these 12 participants would decide whom to kick out of the house and off the show until only one 'winning' contestant was left. MBC 2 altered the show's format to conform to Bahrain's Arab and Islamic culture by segregating the male and female contestants and having them only interact in the communal areas. Only after format alterations did the Minister of Information Nabeel Al Hamer give the go ahead for the project to be based on Bahrain's tourist island of Amwaj, according to press reports. (COMMENT: Rumors abound that Al Hamer was one of Bahrain's leading investors in the project. END COMMENT.)

SUNNI ISLAMISTS CHASE BIG BROTHER FROM BAHRAIN

¶13. (U) Even with alterations to the show's format, parliamentary conservatives attacked Minister Al Hamer for failing to keep his promise to maintain strict Islamic values. Sunni conservative and Al Minbar Islamiyya (Muslim Brotherhood) member MP Shaikh Mohammed Khalid proposed that an investigative committee look into the motives of the Minister. Along with five others MPs, Salafi leader and Second Vice Chairman of the Council of Representatives (COR) MP Adel Al Moawda called for questioning the Information Minister, the first step towards a vote of no confidence and removal of a minister from office.

¶14. (C) According to the press, conservative religious leaders outside parliament ramped up the rhetoric, declaring the show "rampant moral depravity." Friday sermons at the end of February and into early March warned parents of the show's "dangerous implications" and reprimanded Minister Al Hamer for failing to keep Bahrain "clean." Sunni conservatives organized a public protest at which about 1000 protesters attempted to make their way to the filming site. Smaller protests occurred in downtown Manama and other locations. MBC 2 announced on March 3 that it was stopping production in Bahrain and withdrawing its production team. It laid off 200 workers, including 85 Bahrainis, according to press reports. The show's assistant producer told Poloff last week that the rumor on the set was that the Government told MBC 2 to halt the production. MBC 2's public statement made no reference to Government involvement in the decision in order to preserve appearances of network freedom, she alleged. (Comment: We have no confirmation yet from other sources of GOB involvement in the decision. End Comment.)

THE GOB'S PRE-EMPTIVE CAPITULATION POLICY

15. (U) The successful campaign against the TV show is the latest in a string of recent victories Bahraini Islamists have gained to enforce more conservative social norms in Bahrain. In December 2002, the Commerce Minister severely restricted alcohol sales in response to press from the Islamist block in the elected chamber of the Parliament (the Islamists are the largest block with 17 of the 40 representatives). In June 2003, conservatives were successful in passing a bill through the COR to ban the sale of alcohol to Muslims. (The Parliament's upper chamber, the Shura Council never acted on the legislation, thus blocking its passage into law.) In the following month, the King allowed fully-veiled women to drive, despite the Shura Council's overwhelming rejection of a COR sponsored bill authorizing the same. According to the press, the royal decision followed a private meeting between the King and Salafi leader Al Moawda. The GOB has also aggressively closed hotels and clubs for allegedly violating GOB limitations on alcohol sales and entertainment.

BUSINESS COMMUNITY PROTESTS FIZZLE

16. (U) Angered by the cancellation of the show, prominent businessman and Big Brother investor Farouq Al-Moayed lambasted the six conservative members of Parliament for demanding the cancellation of the show. He remarked to the press that the debate about the show will have a negative impact on foreign investment. Along these lines, an American oil company executive visiting the Gulf told RSO on March 8 that American firms operating in the region have started to notice the Islamist protests and restrictive social policy initiatives. They compare this agitation with the quiet in places like Qatar and the UAE, he commented. Bahrain does not fare well in this comparison, he concluded, and no American firms are likely to choose to put a new regional base in Bahrain instead of a country judged quote more stable end quote.

17. (C) Commenting on the negative effect the Islamists have inflicted on Bahrain's economy, dynamic young business leader Sofyan Al-Moayed asserted to PolOff March 7 that tourism is down 40 percent over last year's levels. Chairman of the Bahrain Businesswomen's Society Afnan Al Zayani (Information Minister al-Hamer's wife) told PolOff on March 7 that in 2001 and 2002 hotels were at 106 percent occupancy. However for New Year's 2003 and Eid holidays, hotels were only 30 percent occupied. Another leading businessman described the 2004 Eid al-Adha holiday to us as a "business disaster."

18. (C) Bahrain Chamber of Commerce and Industry board member Jawad Habib Jawad asserted that hotel occupancy is tied to alcohol consumption, which is way down. An American Express executive confirmed this impression to P/E Chief on March 7. He said that GCC tourists who used to come to Bahrain are now filling Dubai's and Doha's hotels. Another prominent American businessman complained that Bahrain's clubs are now serving liquor in teapots, just like in Kuwait. A Microsoft executive quipped that because of the limited availability of alcohol, entertainment companies are importing more prostitutes into Bahrain.

19. (C) Leading businessman Abdul Hammed Kooheji commented angrily to PolOff on March 8 that the GOB is allowing Islamists to run the country, and they are running it into the ground. He added that the Islamists will attack businessmen personally as well as their companies. Thus, he lamented, there is little the business community can do to fight the conservatives. Bahrain Businessmen's Association President Khaled al-Moayed told us March 6 that while Bahrain is negotiating a FTA to encourage more foreign investment from the U.S. and other countries, conservative Islamists are threatening Bahrain's reputation as a relatively open, moderate society hospitable to a variety of cultures. When PolOff asked members of the Bahrain's Businessmen's Association why there are so few businessmen active in politics, Khalid Al-Moayed answered that the business community is too fearful to cross the Islamists, who in turn are too ignorant to make intelligent policy decisions. So far, Al-Moayed said, the business community is too dignified to run for parliamentary office to confront the Islamist parliamentary bloc through the ballot box. Separately, Khalid's son, Sofyan al-Moayed, told us March 7 that few Bahraini businessmen would confront the Islamists for fear the Islamists would organize a boycott of their Bahraini companies. The Islamists are large and dangerous, he observed.

COMMENT

110. (C) We do not sense in any way that stability in Bahrain is under threat, but we do sense much greater

Islamist assertiveness - a conclusion underlined to us by Central Bank Governor Sheikh Ahmed bin Mohammed last week as well. Emboldened by the GOB's decision not to confront their social initiatives, Bahrain's Islamists have begun articulating an even more ambitious agenda, calling for the segregation of cinemas, the censorship of films, and the banning of alcohol sales. They are on record in support of segregating men and women at the University of Bahrain. We are uncertain why the King continues to retreat in the face of Sunni Islamist pressure. He could easily rely on the more liberal-minded Shura Council and the cabinet to block Sunni Islamist legislative initiatives. Regardless, the outcry from the business community against the pressure on MBC 2's TV show is the first time anyone in Bahrain's society has criticized the impact of Islamist "reforms" directly. Shura Council member and Amwaj Properties General Manager Jameel al-Matrouk told P/E Chief on March 9 that he is planning a major anti-Islamist media blitz for next week. Big Brother has left Bahrain, but its departure may have awakened Bahrain's business community to the challenge posed by the Sunni Islamist political agenda. END COMMENT.

FORD